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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001663

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#) [ASSK](#)

SUBJECT: ASSK HOLDS PRESS CONFERENCE; CONDEMNS HARASSMENT
IN RAKHINE STATE

REF: RANGOON 1633

Classified By: P/E Chief Paul Daley. Reason: 1.5 (d).

1. (C) Summary: At a press conference December 31, Aung San Suu Kyi continued to express "cautious optimism" about the possibility of political change in Burma in 2003, but complained about harassment during her recent trip to Rakhine State. Post recommends that the Department support her comments with a statement that calls for change in Burma and for GOB action to protect the rights of political parties (see para 7 for suggested text of statement). End Summary.

2. (U) In a year-ending press conference held at the NLD's Shwegondine headquarters in Rangoon, Aung San Suu Kyi complained about USDA harassment during her recent trip to Rakhine State, but continued to express cautious optimism about the possibility for political change in Burma in 2003. Overall, she said, there had been some good developments in Burma in 2002, but not as much as the country demands. Some political prisoners had been released, but the NLD's position remained that all should be released immediately, without pre-conditions. Similarly, the NLD had been able to open some (about 90) of its 300 township offices, but had not been allowed to open all that it was ready to open. At the insistence of the authorities, some openings had been delayed. By and large, she said, her travels in Burma had also gone well, with the cooperation of the authorities. However, her recent trip to Rakhine State, in particular, had been marred by disturbances instigated by the USDA and other semi-official organs of the government.

3. (U) ASSK also said that she had been encouraged by the spirit of the Burmese people, but "saddened" by the state of the nation. She had found, she said, a great sense of "national solidarity" and a general awareness of the need for change. However, there was also a great concern about the state of the economy and about the plight of farmers, who were now obliged to sell a portion of their crop to the government at below market prices. The Burmese people, she said, deserved a better standard of living and a better governance. Hopefully, they would get both in 2003.

4. (U) In response to questions, she provided some details about the harassment she had endured during the trip to Rakhine State. One government minister (reportedly the Minister of Tourism Thein Zaw) had gone ahead to Mrauk Oo and other cities and had urged the people not to turn out for the NLD leaders. The USDA, the Myanmar Red Cross, and the War Veterans had then cooperated to block off streets in many towns. Other members of the USDA had distributed leaflets questioning ASSK's patriotism and loyalty because of her marriage to a foreigner. Together, these actions showed, ASSK said, how some elements in the government felt about her travels. NLD Spokesman U Lwin had been told in Rangoon that none of the harassment had been ordered by the SPDC and, she said, she was prepared to accept that; however, the harassment had plainly been coordinated at some level (perhaps the state level), since the same events occurred again and again throughout the trip.

5. (U) In regard to her talks with the government, ASSK insisted that there was no dialogue. There also was no confidence-building -- that was over. Relations with the government, she said, were now in a "state of limbo." She was prepared to join in a dialogue with the government at any time, with no preconditions. However, it had to be a real dialogue, not a "show-piece."

Comment

6. (C) This was ASSK's second press conference since she was released in May. Her intent was plainly to call attention to the events in Rakhine State and to suggest that the government may not be sincere in its dealings with her. While she was careful not to accuse the SPDC itself for any wrongdoing during her trip to Rakhine State, she made it very clear that she held them responsible for the state of the nation and the delays in the start of "real dialogue." She was also plainly walking a fine line in all her comments -- never willing to actually breach whatever understandings she

has with the government regarding political behavior, but, at the same time, making sure that everyone understood who the bad guys are in Burma.

Action Recommended

17. (C) Given ASSK's comments, post suggests that the Department make a statement of support for ASSK and the dialogue process. The British Embassy has told us that they plan to recommend that their government (and the EU) also put out messages. We leave it to the Department to work out the exact text (perhaps in coordination with the British), but something along the following lines might be appropriate.

BEGIN TEXT:

"In a press conference in Rangoon on December 31, Aung San Suu Kyi described the harassment to which she was subjected during her recent trip to Burma's Rakhine State. While it is not clear who is responsible for the actions of semi-official government organizations like the Union Solidarity Development Agency, the War Veteran's Organization, and the Myanmar Red Cross, it is clear that efforts by government-affiliated groups to harass opposition party leaders cannot help a national reconciliation process to which the Burmese government itself has committed itself. The United States calls on the Government of Burma to ensure that all political parties can carry their message to the Burmese people in safety. We also call on the State Peace and Development Council to join with the NLD and representatives of Burma's ethnic communities in a real dialogue regarding constitutional issues. Change is needed in Burma. As Aung San Suu Kyi said December 31, the Burmese people deserve a better government and a better standard of living. Every effort should be made to see that they get both in 2003."

END TEXT.
Martinez